

# DIGNITY, HONOR RESPECT

## Team prepares uniforms for nation's fallen heroes

by Capt. Christine L. Kunz  
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Staff Sgt. Daniel Geoffroy ensures there are no fingerprints on any brass buttons. Not a scratch on a chrome belt buckle. He's proud of how the two tiny bronze star devices on the ribbon rack gleam from the polishing he gave them with a high-speed rotary tool lying nearby.

Painstakingly, with a toothpick, the sergeant fills the letters of every metallic name tag with Air Force blue paint. To say he's meticulous with the uniforms he works with doesn't say it all.

They're not his uniforms. They belong



to men and women of the nation's military services who have come home for burial. He works at the Charles C. Carson Center for Mortuary Affairs, Dover Air Force Base, Del.

Part of an eight-person team — four active-duty Airmen, two Soldiers, a Reserve Airman and a Marine — Sergeant Geoffroy runs the uniform prep room. His team has worked as many as 235 hours in 17 days, doing their part in the global war on terrorism. Their sense of duty reflects the quiet honor they bestow on their comrades. So words like honor, respect and dignity echo through the room when talk turns to the nation's fallen heroes.

**Staff Sgt. Gregory Heard, services specialist,** checks the inventory of flags used to drape transfer cases in the uniform prep room. He is working at the mortuary as part of a four-month Air and Space Expeditionary Force rotation from his home station of Andrews Air Force Base, Md.



**Staff Sgt. Daniel Geoffroy**, noncommissioned officer in charge of the mortuary uniform room, sets up the engraving machine to make a nametag. The mortuary is now one of only two places where service nametags can be made. Before the engraving machine, it would take at least a week for a nametag to come in after ordering.



**Senior Airman Edward Rorie**, services specialist, assembles a Marine Corps blue dress uniform in the uniform prep area. Airman Rorie is a reservist, activated on a year-long tour, from the 512th Airlift "Liberty" Wing at Dover Air Force Base, Del.



This team may not be on the front lines. But ensuring each servicemember looks their best for the final trip home makes their solemn job an equal part of the mission. As such, the team doesn't have time to ponder the reality that the troops they're serving will never return to duty. They've formed a kind of detachment from that truth that helps them focus on their serious task.

"The fallen are placed in our hands," Sergeant Geoffroy said. "We're here for the families, and we're not going home until every one can be back home with their loved ones."

The uniform operations mission isn't a nine-to-five, five-day-a-week job. Aircraft arrive at Dover at all hours. So the task can take a tremendous toll on the team.

During contingency operations, about 65 remains a month arrive at the mortuary. That number doesn't include troops who have died on duty, regardless of the cause of death. Since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the mortuary staff has worked 10 to 12-hour days, non-stop, sometimes going without time off. At the height of operations, the staff swelled to 200, and included people from the FBI and other sections of the Department of Defense.

"Not for 30 years have we seen an ops tempo like this," said Karen Giles, the center director and Air Force reserve lieutenant colonel. "It's a terrible and a wonderful mission all in one."

Ms. Giles is not new to the impact death has on people, not only grieving families, but those who work in the mortuary. The teams must learn to deal with the workload and the grim nature of the job they perform. Stress takes a heavy toll on the group, but with training and counseling, they learn to cope.

Sergeant Geoffroy said seeing how well his team works is how he gets through trying days. That's when, he said, "A feeling of accomplishment and emotion takes over."

But to help the staff deal with the stress, the mortuary relies on trained counselors. They give the team the opportunity to talk about their feelings, which helps build trust and rapport. Plus, the mortuary has two full-time chaplains available around-the-clock to help.

"This job isn't for everyone," Ms. Giles said. "If someone changes their mind about being able to do this job after their two-day orientation training, then we tell them it's OK to leave."

While a tough job, at best, what's unlikely to change is the commitment and sense of duty the mortuary staff feels. Senior Airman Edward Rorie, a 41-year-old services journeyman, loves what he does because he gets to work side-by-side with Soldiers, Sailors and Marines.

### Close-knit group

"We're a close-knit group," he said. "We have to be, because we're all working for our fellow servicemembers."

It's why he didn't mind working every holiday last year. Still, the end of the day is best, when the work is done. Or when the team gets word there's no one else coming in.

"This is the most humbling job I've ever done," he said. "There's nothing hard about what we do — we create comfort for the next person in a family."

### Attention to detail

Creating that reassurance takes a lot of effort and attention to detail. So once Sergeant Geoffrey receives a name, the team springs into action. First, he pulls a decorations "rip sheet" so a ribbon rack can be built, from scratch. Each team member must have a good working knowledge of all the service's awards and decorations regulations. It's one of the toughest jobs for the noncommissioned officer in charge of the uniform shop.

"The guides are always changing," the 12-year veteran from Massachusetts said. "And we have to know the exact placement of awards that aren't even available for purchase yet. I have to make a lot of phone calls, and you can't be afraid to ask questions."

The mortuary keeps a full stock of uniforms and insignia, and makes every effort to ensure each one — down to the last button and pin — is as complete as possible. And while building ribbon racks, the team must also find every badge needed. So rows and rows of badges and devices adorn the uniform shop's walls.

"The last thing we want is to not have something in stock when we need it," Sergeant Geoffroy said. "Time is everything, so we're constantly updating our supplies and staying on top of everything [new] that comes out."

Attention to detail takes on a whole new meaning at the shop. As some make ribbon racks or polish badges and medals, other team members iron new creases on the uniforms. Everyone inspects each uniform with the critical eye of a basic training instructor. They look for lint, a smudge, a lone piece of string dangling. They check, double-check and then check again the decoration rip to account for every ribbon. That each device is squared away. That every badge shines to perfection.

"We do a mission here that doesn't tolerate mistakes," said Sergeant Geoffroy. "If you've made one mistake, you've made one too many." 🕊



**A Dremel rotary tool gives a Bronze Star 4 device the high-gloss polish** members of the mortuary team uniform room give to every piece of chrome and metal.

**Get more details**

For more information and photos about the mortuary, go to [www.af.mil/news/airman](http://www.af.mil/news/airman)